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Shape-Shifting Anew:
A COVID-19 Come-Unity Engagement Project
Co-Created by an International Student Collective
Capstone Thesis
Lesley University

May 5th, 2021

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Expressive Arts Therapy

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Abstract

COVID-19's looming hold over the global landscape compounds already established stressors facing international students studying in the U.S. Now, more than ever, there needs to be intentional and innovative research approaches to meet the growing needs of this overlooked population. Thus, a virtual expressive arts-based performative inquiry of reciprocity and collaboration was developed to support international students in the midst of the pandemic. This arts-based participatory action research was built in three stages: phase one consisted of a devising process where international students could build a performance collectively, phase two invited members of the wider expressive therapies study body to participate in a community engagement event of further co-creating, and phase three made space for my arts-based reflection. As an international student, I opted to adopt an autoethnographic model that allowed me to better situate myself more (w)holistically into the study while drawing from my own experiences and offering an arts-based reflection to integrate the identity of both researcher and active participant. Results indicate that international student participants felt empowered and inspired by the process of devising and owning their own voices, which had a noticeable impact on the audience member's ability to engage with the material and continue co-creating towards a collective resonance of being part of something bigger. These findings suggest that the expressive arts hold promise as an engaging, embodied, and culturally sensitive tool to support international students through discomfort, to open up discovery for new possibilities, and to disrupt traditional approaches to communication, research, and education.

Keywords: expressive arts therapy, co-creation, arts-based participatory action research, international students, COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

This is a time for deep reflection, courageous deconstruction, and intentional rebuilding in alignment with the world in which we live and the learners whom we serve.

– Hong & Moloney, 2020

This thesis is being molded against the backdrop of a time in history that seeps into every facet of life as we have come to know it and will thus have lasting impacts on humanity as we once understood it. Previously unknown to humans, highly infectious, and with no human immunity, COVID-19 took the world by storm after emerging in late 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Making U.S. history, all 50 states would soon find themselves under a disaster declaration with 95% of the population having to quarantine and follow stay-at-home orders in an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus (Bell et al., 2020). Just as the pandemic's disproportionate impact on marginalized communities was illuminating the systemic inequities of contemporary America, the highly visible murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd awakened decades of existing racial inequities and police brutality (Hong & Moloney, 2020). Amidst this social unrest, policy attacks on international students threatened to have them return home to complete their studies online as potential laws attempted to make the case that they were no longer within the restrictions of their student visa requirements due to pandemic induced shifts to virtual learning (Alsandor and Yilmazli, 2020). I recall how overwhelming this potential policy change was for me as closed borders at home prevented me from returning and I was potentially facing all of the repercussions of remaining in a country that would deem me illegal.

Keels (2020) calls for educators to enhance their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices to meet the needs of a time in history where students must face the historical ties between race, economic marginalization, and exposure to trauma. The

implications of a global pandemic that is rapidly re-shaping life as we knew it is yet to be fully understood and being submerged within its fresh disequilibrium can feel too overwhelming and perplexing to face without enough distance. Still, there is a need to begin to research how this pandemic is affecting those impacted by its looming hold over our physical and mental health. As history has shown during times of crisis, one of the most necessary and neglected areas of impact is mental health (McCutcheon et al., 2020). Kar et al. (2021) examined stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic using an online survey open to the general public, where they found that the mental health problems surveyed were significantly associated with students who are 20-30 years old, single, and university educated. The researchers found that a major contributing factor towards this trend was the worry associated with career and job prospects.

Goldstein (2020) argues that there is a lack of research focusing on the psychological impacts of COVID-19 on graduate students as a whole. Even less attention is being given to the sub-set of international students who have complex stressors worth considering beyond their national counterparts. Lai et. al (2020) offer the first study on stressors, coping strategies and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on international students studying abroad. After surveying the literature, the researchers found that this population has been overlooked as there were no articles on COVID-19's impact on international students. In response to this gap in the research, Lai et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional online questionnaire survey to collect information on how the pandemic was affecting a sample of 124 full-time international students who were either studying in the UK or USA. Findings showed that more than 80% of the international students studied had moderate-to-high perceived stress. Contributors to these significant levels of stress included: adjusting to the host country's culture and norms, being away from central social support systems such as family or friends, and having different cultural characteristics that may

affect coping strategies in the host country. Thus, there is a need to engage with research that focuses on how international students are coping with and navigating stressors related to the pandemic. Given the consistent and growing literature on the detrimental effects of social isolation and loneliness against the mitigating effect of social support (see Moyer, 2021 and Lai et. al, 2020), there is a heightened sense of urgency to critically reflect on the experience of international students who are more vulnerable to this isolation and lack of social support when forced to remain in their host country. Furthermore, public health experts were already devoting considerable attention towards the epidemic of loneliness in the U.S. and the pandemic has exacerbated this phenomenon as many people are no longer able to engage in meaningful social contact beyond their households (Ducharme, 2020).

I frame this thesis by positioning my creative work within an autoethnographic tradition that scholars before me have argued “allows us to center ourselves, not as marginal and fractured but as whole and important.” (Bell et. al, 2020). It is my hope that taking on this autoethnographic approach will similarly allow me to position myself more (w)holistically within the study as I find it to be a productive methodology to convey resistance, while also demonstrating within the form of the writing style itself how decolonial approaches can defy traditions within the academy. Thus, this thesis contains a performance based autoethnographic arts-based research enquiry that best allows me to situate myself as an international student from Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore, placing myself as an active participant in this research whilst simultaneously holding the role of researcher is an attempt to better gain self-awareness and channel my own lived experience and felt sense of this creative project in order to validate the dimensions of embodied knowledge and meaning making for which this thesis advocates for. The sample of participants that I share this research with include four other M.A. level students

in Lesley's Expressive Arts Therapy program. As each of these students near graduation from a program that has been subjected to the whirlwind of what pandemic induced learning and training entails, the creative process hoped to provide a door to enter the unknown constructively and creatively while allowing what emerges to guide the collective towards new insights and greater clarity.

This thesis hypothesized that the expressive arts may be a productive and appropriate tool to support international students dealing with the complex stressors induced by the pandemic. Thomas and Blanc (2021), a Dance/Movement Therapist and Movement Therapist who co-created an arts-based exploration across their disciplines, called for a collaborative expansion of researchers who are able to further an emerging tradition of arts-based work that actively deconstructs and reconstructs shared histories. Furthermore, their study demonstrated and modeled how an arts-based autoethnographic frame can allow researchers to recognize and celebrate their embodied knowledge while being affirmed by the container of a co-creative relationship rooted in collaboration. In an attempt to answer their call and further their mission, this thesis attempts to similarly think critically about honoring the multiplicity of the expressive arts while taking on an approach authentic to the creative form that ethically and actively engages participants in co-creative and culturally sensitive ways. Brearley (2008) further argues that creative forms of representation are built upon the notion that meaning is not encountered but rather constructed. Thus, the critical step of adding a constructive interpretation onto the creative act becomes a source of meaning-making. Furthermore, Brearley urges the reader to reimagine the roles of 'writer' and 'reader' to co-creators of meaning who actively engage in the process of deconstruction and collective co-creation. Similarly, this thesis recognizes and values each participant as a co-creator of meaning worthy of contributing to this research.

This thesis' research inquiry hopes to demonstrate how the expressive arts may be a fitting tool with which to better understand and support the needs of international students. Continuing to utilize the creative process at all phases of the research process from data collection to reflection further attempts to model how the expressive arts may aid in research methodologies that hope to offer more innovative, culturally sensitive, and flexible approaches to reach populations who have historically been overlooked in the margins of society. Furthermore, this thesis' autoethnographic approach attempts to honor and validate my embodied lived experience as an active participant of this research. I will begin by reviewing existing literature that both grounds the need for this type of creative meeting place for international students while exploring what researchers before me have found valuable when considering the benefits of the expressive arts. I will then present the three stages of this research enquiry including: the devising phase by the international student collective, the community event of opening up the conversation and inviting further co-creating, and my arts-based response. Finally, I will discuss limitations and recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the research available on the impact of COVID-19 on international students studying in the U.S. and the potential the expressive arts may have when considering creative ways to innovate new possibilities. Arts-based participatory action research is discussed in order to lay the groundwork for the research methodology of choice for this thesis which hopes to disrupt traditional forms of research enquiry that have a history of dismissing creative contributions (Barone and Eisner, 2012). My intention is to provide a foundational understanding of the relevant research to set the stage for building up to my community engagement project and arts-based reflection.

COVID-19 Influence on International Students in the U.S.

Prior to the pandemic, studies were already attempting to better understand and investigate isolation in relation to international students studying in the U.S. One such study surveyed 54 participants and held focus groups and individual interviews with ten individuals (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). The researchers found that these international students experience high levels of isolation both academically and socially. Interestingly, this study also found that international students completing their studies online felt even more isolated than their traditional counterparts, which students in this new age of the pandemic now share in common due to the pandemic's shift to virtual learning. This study done years prior to the pandemic illuminates just how complex the presenting challenges of this point in history potentially are on the lives of international students. Alsandor and Yilmazli (2020) focused their investigation on what graduate students experienced when being forced to transition from face-to-face to virtual learning amidst global social unrest. The authors developed a short survey with open-ended questions, which they had 32 graduate students (7 international) fill out two times over the course of a semester. Findings from these surveys revealed that students need a safe space in order to better feel connected, to create a sense of community, and to give a voice to each member of the collective.

What does it mean to no longer have a campus or other physical places of belonging for students who have left their homes to complete their studies in the U.S.? Terrazas-Carrillo et. al's (2017) study set out to explore this very question as they attempted to research how place-making may impact international students. The researchers framed their investigation by presenting studies which support that international students have a higher likelihood of experiencing emotional distress than their domestic counterparts before highlighting that there

has been a lack of research attempts to understand what factors better allow these students to thrive and cope with graduate studies in the U.S. Thus, Terrazas-Carrillo et. al (2017) attempted to close this gap in the literature by studying what mechanisms may foster greater persistence among international students. The researchers found that place-making provided a sense of predictability, safety, and a breeding ground for identity development, de-stressing, renewal, safety, and establishing social connections. Furthermore, the researchers highlighted how social support has been shown to be a major predictor as to whether graduate students will develop psychological stress and stress-related illness or not. Thus, this thesis considers how we may be able to create a sense of place and belonging virtually given the need to establish social connections that may better allow for this sense of safety, renewal, and growth.

A preliminary study on the cognitive processes that regulate how the pandemic influences mental health revealed that core belief violation and disrupted meaning-making were stronger determinants of the severity of mental health distress than multiple, substantial COVID stressors (Milman et al., 2020). According to these authors, stressful events such as the pandemic can cause mental health disorders due to the violation of core beliefs that disrupt individual's identity, expectations for the future, and their perception of the world that surrounds them. Thus, the study argues that COVID threatens our sense of agency over our lives and any certainty regarding what the future may hold. In a related study, Karatas & Tagay (2021) found a significant and negative relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and resilience. This finding supports Milman et al.'s (2020) findings as uncertainty is a major player involved in core belief violation and disrupted making meaning where losing a sense of control can negatively affect one's belief system and ability to make sense of their situation. This thesis sets out to better understand how the creative form's invitation to enter the unknown and better cope with

uncertainty may generate new meaning towards restoring one's narrative and building resilience. Furthermore, providing an open and flexible creative process holds potential to disrupt traditional notions of knowledge production and the power dynamics within them.

Martinez and Plough (2018) provide a relevant model that similarly challenges and disrupts previous conceptualizations of socialization wherein international graduate students were expected to passively receive a community's values, skills, and norms in order to assimilate. The authors presented *socialization reciprocity* as a remedy to this potentially harmful framework whereby international students are no longer seen as deficient but rather valuable agents of change in their own right. This concept of *socialization reciprocity* is defined by the authors as a mutually beneficial exchange where each member of a community is simultaneously transformed and transforms, holding space for the shared balance of contributing and benefiting from the collective whole. This embodiment of the belief in and commitment to giving a voice to every individual involved mirrors the concept of the Co-Creators Collective which evolved to be a space where this concept of *socialization reciprocity* could be played out through the act of shared co-creating. I particularly appreciate how this reframe allows readers to recognize that international graduate students hold power to reshape the academy, thus allowing them to better appreciate how they are agents of change able to mold themselves into contributing roles that have lasting impact in academia. Similarly, Marks (2018) turns inward towards the Māori concept of *ako*, the idea of reciprocal learning and teaching, wherein the traditional notions of teaching being done onto someone is challenged by the together with them approach. Furthermore, Marks argued that trusting in the poietic process of the arts supports and facilitates embodied knowledge to facilitate student's deep journeys into themselves. The study questions what it might mean to be a 'not-knowing expert' and what the arts might have to say

about this. This thesis would argue that the expressive arts provide us with a creative framework to recognize how much we have to both gain and give within a level-playing field where all involved are better able to access one another free of harmful power dynamics.

Sajnani and Tillberg-Webb (2020) suggest that there is promise in turning to the arts given the researchers' findings around the potential for aesthetic, sensory, multimedia offerings to effectively engage students within online learning environments. In their examination of how the arts and aesthetics support education in the creative arts therapies' virtual classroom, the researchers discovered that a creative framework was better able to facilitate openness, connection, flexibility, humor, and critical thinking while inviting conversations about emotionally difficult themes to form within a platform accessible to a diverse array of learning styles. In this way, paralleling the work we do as expressive arts therapists, the arts-based researcher builds interventions with sufficient aesthetic distance while framing the encounter within a representational realm that allows for both emotional arousal and cognitive reflection. Sajnani and Tillberg-Webb thus call for course designs that encourage and support instructors to experiment and infuse the arts to allow for multi-sensory technologies that engage learners in new ways that open up untapped possibilities, especially within the virtual landscape. Given this new era marked by social distancing, the researchers expand their considerations to urge the reader to consider how much of a need there is to mitigate disengagement across all disciplines, not just confined to those explicitly involving the arts, and how much promise there is for the arts to provide aesthetic presence towards innovating ways of creating and sustaining more (w)holistic, multi-sensory learning environments.

Rahiem (2021) argues that education should not solely focus on preparing students for the workforce as life's trials require a level of resilience, so it is just as important and necessary

to empower student's to confidently face obstacles such as those resulting from the pandemic. Thus, this thesis goes a step further from providing a shared space of belonging to consider how the creative process may be able to empower students in training to value their unique contributions and resilience despite the challenges that they face. In response to observing how disempowerment and despondent students had grown amidst the pandemic, Smith (2020) attempted to revive their agency and resilience. The students were asked to critique the researcher's essay on karma. The essay's conceptualization of karma is not to be confused with the mainstream notions of karma as 'what goes around comes around' as Smith is more interested in cause-and-effect relationships which allow us to better place what I/we can do to make meaningful change. Such interdependent cause-and-effect relationships are important features of indigenous and eco-spiritualities (Yunkaporta, 2019) and closely tie to this thesis' emphasis on the act of co-creation where each member is both actively participating and witnessing in the unfolding of the process of meaning making. Thus, recognizing and practicing this act of co-creation can be understood as an empowering tool that hopes to push students to see and value their ability to both impact and be impacted by the act of co-creation. Reyes, Carales, and Sansone (2020), three scholars of color who studied their motivations for returning home after entering the professorate, co-constructed meaning in a systematic self-reflection piece that demonstrates how such a creative act in community, such as this thesis, can be understood as an act of critical agency, transformational resistance, and active engagement in reciprocity.

Kustec (2020) provides their conceptualization of a spiral participatory model in social work using creative media which is built around the idea of a co-creative working relationship. Here, social work is understood within a relational and working context wherein the social worker, the user of social work services, and any other participants can co-create new

possibilities and circumstances. Such an emphasis on active participation, closely aligned with this thesis' participatory action research methodology, ensures that those who are the focus of the study are active participants who have the right to be involved in the creation of knowledge about themselves. This is a particularly effective approach when considering how much it empowers participants to recognize that they are capable of and should demand being more than powerless, passive observers or recipients of aid. This context provides a space in which each person both has the right to, and actually can, express themselves in their own unique way. Thus, the next section focuses more closely on what specific contributions the expressive arts may have towards facilitating greater connection, wellbeing, and agency for international students.

Discomfort, Expressive Arts, and Discovery Anew

Expressive Arts Therapy is the newest branch of creative arts therapies and is thus a young and emerging field. It is built on the modern philosophy that the separateness of art forms are misleading given arts innate intersections across the human senses. Thus, there is an emphasis on the plural form, arts, which better captures this multiplicity (Knill, 1999). Regarded as the philosopher of the field who reclaimed *poiesis* to capture our innate human impulse to shape our worlds, Stephen Levine (2019), advocates for an expanded understanding of the arts wherein it is more than simply a form of self-expression. In other words, the creation is not merely an extension of the individual but can rather speak for itself. You change with it and it changes you—paralleling what other leaders in the Expressive Arts Therapy (EXA) field (see Moon, Halprin, and Knill) all seem to be proposing. According to Levine (2019), we must be open to the chaos of not knowing what direction the art wishes to take us if we wish to reach creative renewal and regeneration. It is only by letting go of thought and control that we are able to allow the process of creation to take us to new and transformative places. Levine's teaching

parallels and holds promise when thinking about how to reframe our current predicament as the pandemic naturally forced humanity into such a place of uncertainty where we have given up any sense of control. Perhaps, relinquishing this control is not as overwhelming or as scary if we recognize how much potential it holds in allowing us to create and transform anew.

We may sometimes have the unsettling feeling of having to feel our way in the dark, but the willingness to be in a position of not-knowing leaves the potential for discovery wide open.

Through this attentive, open, curious, non-judgmental, wonder-filled approach to artworks, we establish a co-creative venture with them. We are ready to be affected by them as we are to have an effect upon them. We don't look to diagnose them any more than we expect them to diagnose us. We engage in a relationship with them. In art therapy studio, we make our art and our art makes us (Moon, p. 151)

Here, Moon (2001) further articulates the potential of entering into such creative spaces of the unknown where we embrace the 'not-knowing expert' to recognize how much we still have to learn and discover through sitting with discomfort. Wilson (2020) reminds us that discomfort is considered key to social change as preached by bell hooks. Sitting in and staying with this uneasiness holds political, ethical, and pedagogical potential. Thus, creating contexts that evoke a contained level of uncertainty, such as those embedded within the expressive arts, holds promise towards disrupting inflexible frameworks and offering transformation. Furthermore, paralleling concepts of *socialization reciprocity* and the Māori concept of *ako*, this idea of both shaping and being shaped by our artwork suggests that the expressive arts themselves become active participants in the creative encounter between teacher-student and researcher-participant.

Norris (2020) views the research act as a leap of faith where we are able to enter the unknown to discover something new or to uncover what we did not know we already knew. He reminds the reader that such acts are well established within both the arts and sciences. Norris

goes on to present O'Neill's (1995) teaching approach of process drama in which students are invited to live "through" the material. This co-emergence of both experiential learning and research invites and allows students to embody what-if contexts free of the actual consequences of the real world. This thesis similarly offers an improvisational prompt that invites students to imagine what a symbolic representation of their future place in the expressive therapies field may look like before embodying and playing with its possibilities. Fels and Belliveau (2008) conceptualized their version of this what-if research as *performative inquiry*, which they articulate as both a research methodology and action site of learning for collaboration among researchers and participants to engage with a more (w)holistic understanding of who we are within co-evolving contexts. In relation to the current study, the Co-Creators Collective's stage becomes an extension of the imagination, which is an inner space where we have already learned to improvise privately. This thesis' arts-based research can be understood as a communal meeting place for the imagination to roam free and collectively discover new possibilities in the external world. Furthermore, the devising process building up towards the performance in this thesis' community project can be situated within the frame of an interaction laboratory where our improvisations could unfold within the contained safety of the what-if rather than the actual. Thus, these encounters become trial runs to embody and imagine how these insights might become stepping-stones towards real change.

Chawla & Atay (2017) present Bhabha's understanding of the *third space* as a stage of in-betweenness inhabited by the colonized subject dealing with the complexities of the duality attached to seemingly opposing cultures. Growing up in Trinidad and Tobago, and even more so coming to study in the U.S., allowed me to get a real taste of what inhabiting this third space feels like. Similarly, international students know this state of holding multiple cultures and self-

concepts all too well. When I embraced the profession of expressive arts therapy, I found myself back in this in-between space of clumsily attempting to balance the science and art ‘divide.’

Shaun McNiff (1999) further highlights how this ‘split identity’ is present within the expressive arts therapies as we juggle both practice and research. Bucciarelli (2016) specifically deals with art therapy but also articulates the tension of this split identity in the field as a metaphoric state of limbo. She believes the consequences of such uncertainty is a lack of identity that causes art therapists to rely on fitting themselves into already established roles and spaces. Feen-Calligan (2012) further argues that the literature addresses the transition from student to helping professional, however, very little is known about the development of a professional identity for students preparing for two professions simultaneously such as the creative arts therapies.

O’Gorman (2005) compared the educational objectives of clinical pastoral counseling and social workers to highlight how these two identities could exist in dual relationship rather than as a dichotomy. Navigating this process on one’s own is a daunting task, so O’Gorman urges faculty to take on the responsibility of both guiding and supervising the construction of such a dual identity. Halprin captures how the arts can offer a form capable of remedying this struggle, “most importantly, we look to the process of art-making, the saving sorceress, to hold our separated parts as we engage in our search for meaningful, creative lives” (1998, p. 134). This thesis similarly turns to the arts via embodied performance to play with the possibilities of consolidating a harmonious professional identity that aligns with the participant’s concepts of self when imagining our futures.

The Current Research

When thinking about Terrazas-Carrillo et. al’s (2017) findings around international student’s need to practice place-making activities for wellbeing, Hiltunen et. al’s (2020)

contribution of *Anchoring Belonging Through Material Practices in Participatory Arts-Based Research* provides a productive argument to consider how the expressive arts may offer a creative means to develop a sense of belonging when in isolation due to the pandemic. The researchers attempted to examine what kinds of ways of knowing artistic practice may yield around belonging. They discovered that the arts offered a necessary form to anchor the ever-evolving elements of belonging into material forms and expressions that were true to the fluid nature of the concept itself. Participants of the art-making process reflected on how their engagement transported them to a state of flow wherein an oceanic feeling was able to allow them to completely melt into their artwork creating a oneness that freezes time and space in that moment. Given this thesis' attempt to provide a space where creative connection can foster community across the screen, these findings suggest that there is potential for the expressive arts product, in this case the performative elements themselves, to provide a sense of belonging that adds another layer beyond the social bonds within the encounter.

Method

In order to gain a critical view of the life experience of students during the pandemic, I guided the international student collective towards devising a performance that would be featured in our community event. We then welcomed each invited witness as an active participant worthy of contributing to the emerging and evolving co-creation as we expanded our conceptualizing to consider how our performance could inspire further dialogue and deeper meaning-making for the wider expressive therapies' student body. I then engaged in my own arts-based process to dive deeper into my meaning-making process post-performance.

Research Approach

This thesis supports Osei-Kofi's (2013) understanding of the potential connections between arts-based research and social justice praxis including honoring multiple ways of knowing, incorporating sensory dimensions of experience, rejecting the notion of knowledge creation as value-free, presenting novel ways to make meaning of the human condition, emphasizing reflexivity, offering invitations for co-creating between researchers and participants, and embodying untapped potentials for raising consciousness and beginning critical dialogue.

Bagley & Castro-Salazar's (2012) "Critical arts-based research in education: performing undocumented histories" offers a fusion of Critical Race Theory with life history and performance to demonstrate how ABR methodology can offer a re-envisioning for counter-stories to be co-created towards transformative arts-based histories. Bagley and Castro-Salazar's study further demonstrates how critical arts-based research within education holds the potential to legitimize and empower marginalized voices from social and educational circles. Furthermore, the researchers present how such an approach allows for an experiential and sensual experience of feeling and knowing where the researcher and researched may co-create within an anti-colonialist critique of the dominant social order.

Irwin (2013) similarly explores the imagined potentials of a critical arts-based approach, which is argued to offer education researchers new pathways for creating knowledge and accessing critical cultural engagement. Such findings suggest there is both promise and a further need to establish more creative and concrete recommendations for traditional research practices that seek to enhance social justice outcomes and accessibility to marginalized portions of the population who have historically been left out of academic circles. Thus, both in the form and

target audience of this research, the hope is to disrupt traditional ways of being in order to imagine what bringing forward overlooked elements of society and research may reveal.

Participants

The recruitment strategy of this study was done through personal correspondence within Lesley's expressive therapies student body with a particular focus on international students who were soon entering the field upon graduation. Due to the scope of this thesis project and the number of international students in Lesley's program, I found myself having to limit my outreach and compromise on the number of students I could invite. In the end, four female students in the expressive arts therapy concentration joined the Co-Creators Collective ready to reconnect in a time that was marked by immense isolation and a loss of community. Given the very real impact of the pandemic and implications of being a student navigating this amidst an approaching graduation, there were barriers to keeping up attendance as the collective numbers fluctuated throughout the following meetings. Initial stages involved devising meetings with four other expressive therapies students from Peru, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and China. All but one student was within the U.S. during the devising process as the participant from Peru was able to travel back home to be with family. The majority of these students were born and raised in their countries of origin and had moved to Boston to complete their graduate studies under a student visa, however, one participant had dual citizenship. Criteria for being involved was intentionally left very flexible in order to allow these international students to choose how much and in what way they wished to be involved in the upcoming community event. From this invitation, two international students agreed to be "performers" as this was uncharted territory where these individuals wished to push themselves outside of their comfort zones and to step into the

unknown of the stage's spotlight which had always intrigued these members who never had a platform to explore it before.

Procedure

This research project was conducted in three phases. The purpose of phase one was for the international student collective to devise a performance that would be featured in the upcoming community event. For phase one, the four female students met over Zoom where we could play around with the possibilities of a performance that gave voice to our experiences as international students about to graduate in the midst of a global pandemic. I received consent and recorded these meetings in order to document the process. After viewing the recording of our second meeting, I felt called to create a verbatim script that was able to mirror back to the group how much our wisdom and naturally expressive way of communicating was like a performance worthy of being witnessed in-of-itself.

The next phase of the process was to perform our devised piece to an active audience of participant witnesses who would then be invited to join us in further co-creating a deeper dialogue informed from the wisdom of the initial performance piece. We collectively decided that we felt most comfortable inviting other students from Lesley's expressive arts therapy concentration as there was already a level of trust developed over our time within the cohort. I thus created a closed Facebook event titled the Co-Creators Collective where I invited our cohort to join us in this 1.5 long Zoom event scheduled on Sunday March 21st, 2021 at 11 am. An email was also sent to these student's Lesley emails to account for individuals who may not be as active on social media. Both forms of outreach included a PDF that cordially invited participants to join us with the following description, *"This project is about our collective experience and what it means to both share with and witness one another. There will be no passive viewing,*

every member will assume a role and contribute to the collective co-creation so come open and ready to dive into the unknown alongside us..." (see Appendix A).

Due to stressors related to pandemic and academic life, the majority of students invited responded expressing regret that the timing of the event did not work within their schedules but that they were very much interested and supportive of the concept to have a creative space where we could re-connect and co-create. Given this realization that there were significant barriers to our cohort attending, I opened up an invitation to my performance-based drama therapy elective, which was actually the source of inspiration for my conceptualization of this project. Thus, the final audience consisted of an international student from our EXA cohort who was part of the devising process but opted out of performing, a U.S. student from our EXA cohort who feels most comfortable with visual art, and a low-residency drama therapy student who I had met through my elective course and who did not know anyone else on the screen.

The final phase of the process was an opportunity for me to continue working through the part of me that still felt active and in search of meaning post-event where I engaged in an embodied arts-based reflection consisting of mask making, embodying a character, and video editing to deepen my understanding and channel what this project had evoked within me through the collective experience. This final step allowed me to take some distance in order to actively engage in an act of reflection that was able to synthesize and integrate lingering aspects of my experience and identities that stayed with me a month after the community event.

Results

The following will include a description of each phase of the process: devising meetings, the performance, and my arts-based reflection:

Phase 1: Devising A Performance

The first devising meeting took place on Zoom Saturday March 6th, 2021. The focus of this initial encounter was to re-connect with the group and assess what themes were already emerging from the collective. At this point, I believed that the primary focus of the group was centered around the identities we held outside of the cultures in which our field was developed. What soon emerged, however, was how much the uncertainty of the pandemic was plaguing members of the group. Whether it be the uncertainty of being able to return to our country of origin, not knowing if our jobs would sponsor us to work in the U.S., feeling unsure about the job search post-graduation, doubting if we could even remain in the country, or feeling stuck in a space that was now our class/office/home, the group was all holding what it meant to be international students developing in a world turned upside down by forces beyond our control. That is when it dawned on me that I had failed to look at the present moment. The obvious theme of the pandemic had not even occurred to me when framing my thesis proposal as I was still in a state of denial running away from what this moment in time meant. But I soon discovered that the impact of this pandemic is ever present and cannot be ignored or dismissed. This is a charged point in history that confronts us with the uneasiness of holding uncertainty.

Thus, my new guiding principle became to consider how the creative process allows participants to enter into the unknown in order to control and play with the direction of what emerges to inform some sense of meaning-making. One of the students voiced just how uncomfortable it was to not have any direction for our performance as they explained that they work better with a set of instructions. I laughed and stopped myself from giving them what they wanted as I opened up the invitation to sit in that discomfort, in the uncertainty of that uneasiness that was so reminiscent of what the group checked in about related to living through the pandemic. At that moment, one of the other members of the collective stepped in and felt

empowered to offer a free-write exercise where each of us could take some time to enter into a stream of consciousness exercise on the blank page before us. What emerged for me was a written piece of poetry (see Appendix B). From there, the student who led the free-write guided the group to circle three words/phrases that were calling out to us for some reason. Each of us then had the opportunity to add these phrases to Zoom's whiteboard for us to document these themes (see Appendix C) as a starting point to continue our evolving co-creation.

The two meetings that followed on March 12th and 14th comprised of conversations infused with embodied and creative forms of communication that supplemented the ideas and thoughts we were sharing together in our collective space. Having recorded these meetings, I was struck by how much the conversations themselves naturally evoked a performative element in line with the creative way we express ourselves in the expressive therapies field. We were all of the performance that we needed. This was a profoundly validating epiphany that resonated with the group when I shared it and prompted us to explore how this might become our performance. I then engaged in my own creative reflection, creating a verbatim script from this session that acted as a sample for us to consider how this improv might take the stage (See Appendix D). While this text cannot give full life to the level of creative flow and insights that I witnessed, it is my hope that it gives readers a taste of the humble wisdom that came out of the collective who constantly repeated "I don't know if I'm making any sense but..." My classmates left me in awe of how much they did in fact make sense and the distance of having a recording to look back on allowed us to appreciate how much wisdom was embedded within us if we just paused to really take a step back and see ourselves for all that we are capable of contributing.

The devising process evolved over the course of 4 meetings to build a performance framework (see Appendix E) grounded in the projective objects that had naturally found their

way into our meetings. Having drawn inspiration from the authentic voices of our devising process, I shared the verbatim script with the other two performers as a source of inspiration, highlighting that the aim was not to recreate that script but rather to give in to what came up in the moment for us collectively. The plan was to transition from object to object as we felt called to while flowing in a predetermined progression of performer 1 – performer 2 – performer 3 and back again. This would all lead towards a spontaneous dance party prompted by one performer's exhaustion from using words and thoughts, proclaiming, "I JUST WANT TO MOVE" where we would then dance and transform into a manifestation of what we hope to be in the field. The performers were given the freedom to choose their character, costuming, and monologue as they felt inspired. I gave the example of one performer's transcript from the devising meeting which I named Free Bird: "this is me in the field, I want to fly. But at the same time, I need some other birds, I need some other people and as they fly, they create waves in the wind that kind of guide my path at the same time, so I almost feel that we are co-creating that path together."

Phase 2: Co-Creators Collective's Community Engagement Event

The community engagement event (see Appendix F) was scheduled to take place on March 21st, 2021 following a rehearsal run-through between myself and the other two performers. That morning, one of my fellow performers discovered that her internet connection back home in Peru had suddenly been completely lost. As she searched for solutions in panic, the reality of the situation settled in and it became clear that the show must go on without her. This became a rich example of just how uncertain pandemic life was, further making a case for spontaneity and flexibility to continue moving forward. This shift meant thinking on our feet and finding new avenues of creativity for us to remedy the presenting problem while ensuring that our co-creator still felt very much a part of the collective.

The plan was updated to be that when my fellow performer called for us to move, I would play the music and shut off my screen to magically appear with her as we were in the same space. This surprise element magnified the sense of separation and coming together that paralleled so much of what we were yearning for and naming throughout the event. This improvisation was used to kickstart the event where I was able to embody the missing performer's character of *Free Bird* (see Appendix G) with a black bird-like mask after presenting my character of *Jammin the Jellyfish* and the other performer introducing her conceptualization of *Undefined*. Staying in character, I then invited the audience members to look around their spaces and choose an object to help them transform into a vision of what they hope to be in the field before changing their name on Zoom to the new character.

Their screens were then updated to *Right Attitude* featuring a pillow, *Courageous Path* featuring a branch, and *Stem Cell Cloud* featuring a formation of cotton. Staying in character, I then invited these new roles to interview the performers with questions. *Right Attitude* asked *Free Bird*, "why are you so awesome?" to which I replied, "I am a reflection of you. Just as wings take us through the clouds, that momentum, those waves allow us to reflect who we are." Next, *Stem Cell Cloud* inquired how high up in the sky *Free Bird* could fly. In response I proclaimed, "I can fly until you don't see me anymore, but you know what? I'm still there. Always there because I was meant to fly in this field, this was always meant to give me flight, I am meant to soar higher than you could ever imagine." Lastly, *Courageous Path* turned to *Undefined* and asked if they ever feel afraid. Undefined admitted, "sometimes I feel afraid. There's always a pull or a push or pull or a push *embodying push and pull movement with dance scarves* Where should I go? What should I do? Who am I? You don't belong here...but I do! I don't learn the way you do. I might not experience in the same way that you do but I know

and I feel and I need to be confident and spread my wings and know that it's the okay choice. I can still fly if I make my own decisions. I can still fly if I learn the way that I do."

From there, I invited the collective of new characters to move with us as I played a song titled 'Reach,' to continue playing around with possibilities of what the future of the field may look like. My fellow performer and I were visibly more comfortable standing up and moving with a full range of motion and utilizing colorful props that filled our spaces. In contrast, the other participant's movement were much more subtle and contained by their objects initially. However, over time, there was a sense of letting go as smiles and laughter filled the screens, and more movement and playfulness could be seen. *Right Attitude* held on to their pillow in a caress and seemed to be taking on more of a witness role. *Stem Cell Cloud's* cotton finger puppet evolved over time as they playfully discovered that two pieces fell off, so they reassembled it into arms that resulted in cheeky giggles as it danced across the screen, hands waving. *Courageous Path* appeared to take a more reflective and thoughtful approach where they engaged with the texture of their branch and seemed to be playing around with different perspectives and ways to be in relationship with it.

Once I opened up the space for us to reflect on this playful activity of imagining the proposed what-if scenario, *Right Attitude* immediately stepped in and shared, "well I am the type of person that is actually very self-conscious and awkward about movement but while [the performers] were improvising I was drawing on my IPAD. I was sort of interpreting it visually which is my way of contributing a performance." They then shared their screen for us to view the moving sequence of their visual art creation, which featured quotes such as 'I was meant to fly,' 'I feel – is that enough,' 'why the obsession with answers' alongside symbols that came up in the performance including a bird, mask, jellyfish, and circular symbols that evolved. I was so blown

away, I remarked “your art really is performance in of itself. It is so alive.” Their defiant ability to stay authentic to the way they conceptualize performance was reminiscent of the devising process, so I went on to share how the performance had come about, “our discussions, the way we talked with one another, was almost like living breathing art, so I came to the point where I was like we don’t need to create something new – we already are the performance. We already have that voice. We have that inner performative element that didn’t need to be created anew. So, this was almost a recap of what was coming up for us by allowing the objects and the kind of evolution of them to just take us through whatever came up so that we were very much open to it.”

From there, the participant who embodied *Courageous Path* shared how much this prompted them to reflect on the arc of their journey as a low-residency student who feels the added disconnect of how people experience things due to the pandemic. They shared that it felt like a “gift” to get such an insight into the collective’s experiences, which almost felt “like a preview but in some ways it’s like a parallel path.” Next, my fellow performer jumped in to share what she had written down, “we are already the performance and the disconnect of how people experience their journeys here.” They continued, “during Orientation we had so much of this creativity together, just feeding off of each other and now it’s so lonely. I feel like I learned more when we were together, I could move in ways that were okay with those who were around me and I could play off of somebody’s thoughts or art or ideas and be like okay what does that mean to me? It was a way of building myself more as an expressive arts therapist.” The international student who stepped into the role of *Stem Cell Cloud* shared next about how the undefined part of the performance resonated with them because they need to find a way to define their path in this field, “the undefined part got me to think because expressive arts is a field that

is less defined than many other fields but also because of my previous background in medicine I can also see how defined this field is like its undefined quality defines this field.”

The next phase of the group process was to embody moving sculptures while filling in the blank of predetermined phrases that I outlined step by step: I am ___, but I will ___ / I am ___, and I am also ___ / We are ___. This following sequence is exactly how it unfolded in the group:

*I am trying but I will arrive
I am in a box but I will
break free
I am undefined but I will
define myself
I am saying no but I will
say yes
I am waiting but I will be
there*

*I am shy and I am also
courageous
I am stuck and I am also
growing
I am me and I am also us
I am soft and I am also
strong
I am quiet and I am also
loud*

*We are full of possibility
We are good enough
We are shape-shifters and
we are just beginning
We are all in this together
We are expressive arts
therapists...whatever that
may mean to you!*

In closing, I invited each member to share what they were taking away and what they wished to offer to the group (see Appendix H). Take-aways ranged from wanting to hang out to wanting to support arts as a valuable form of research to wanting us to recognize that we are part of something bigger that we can return to in the hope of finding balance, wholeness, and peace.

Phase 3: Arts-Based Response of Embodying the Disruptor

Holding onto the arts-based research methodology of this thesis, I engaged in a creative reflection when given the invitation to create a mask and embody a part of me that I was still working through. This unfolded during a Drama Therapy course I was fortunate enough to take in person with Laura Wood approximately a month after completing the community engagement event. This offered me some distance to reflect on all that the process had brought up for me while letting the wisdom of its riches marinate further. Informed from Internal Family Systems theory, I identified the ‘Disruptor’ role within me who was exhausted and feeling defeated. I was

then paired with a student to role-play how we might engage in a therapeutic process of producing an image directed by me to capture the embodiment of this character.

As often happens within the creative process, surprises that open up new possibilities find their way into the creator's life. As I went through images taken on my phone, I discovered that they were "live" and capable of being converted to video clips. Thus, I engaged in a process of creating a video (see Appendix I) that gave life to this disruptor trapped in the projective object of a box, which carried over from the performance. To me, this became a symbolic representation of the Co-Creators Collective's journey of moving beyond the confines of a box to play around with all the possibilities of re-shaping and seeing the encounter anew. I eventually reached to a place where I was ready to let go, free of all the tension that burdened me. Perhaps the disruptor's power is not in their ability to destroy but rather their gift of clearing the way to create something new. Furthermore, the video editing coupled with the sound choice were intentionally chosen to evoke the uneasiness that comes with stepping into uncertainty and how staying with this discomfort can pave the way for new possibilities as the static overlay dissipates at the end of the clip. Coming full circle, I returned to a creation I made during my Lesley journey which echoes what my previous conceptualization of the Disruptor role within me was bringing up (see Appendix I).

Discussion

This study included a community engagement event that aimed to provide a co-creative space for international students to connect, find a sense of belonging, and own the wisdom of their unique voice and contributions. Research was conducted in three phases: phase one consisted of a devising process where international students could build a performance collectively, phase two invited students of the wider expressive therapies community to

participate in a community engagement event of further co-creating, and phase three consisted of my arts-based reflection.

All members involved in the process were viewed as valuable co-creators of meaning (Brearley, 2008), which informed the arts-based participatory action research methodology. Furthermore, situating my own creative response of embodied meaning-making lives within a research tradition of autoethnography (see Thomas and Blanc, 2021), which allowed me to better merge my identities of researcher and active participant. Phase one revealed that we had been searching outside of ourselves to create a performance when the performance was within us all along. We discovered that our natural expressive form of communication and our impulse to aid our conversations with projective objects and movement to live through the material, evocative of O'Neill's (1995) teaching approach of *process drama*, was all we needed.

In reviewing the data collected from each stage of research, I discovered common themes that evolved from feelings of uncertainty, isolation and feeling stuck to connection, creative renewal, hope, and empowerment. The initial phase of the research was marked by a feeling of heaviness where each student was given the space to voice just how much the pandemic was impacting their way of life. Students were able to connect about how many stressors were affecting their quality of life, on top of added layers that come with being a student attempting to consolidate a cohesive professional identity (see Bucciarelli 2016, McNiff 1999, Feen-Calligan 2012, and O'Gorman 2005) that merges both the clinical and creative components of the expressive arts therapist role.

One major finding dealt with participant's feelings of powerlessness plagued by shifts that were out of their control as they navigated the new order away from home, in a confined space hooked to a screen for connection, and with the uncertainty of what their future may look

like. These themes that emerged from the lived experience of participants aligns with Lai et. al's (2020) preliminary research on the complex stressors and mental health effects that plague international students due to the pandemic. However, I wish to emphasize that through the course of the devising process, students were able to enter a state of flow (Hiltunen et. al, 2020) wherein they were building off of one another's thoughts, feelings, and ideas within the contained aesthetic distance of symbolic language and projective objects that helped to facilitate and mirror the evolution of the Co-Creators Collective's emerging trajectory.

Results further indicate that international student participants felt empowered and inspired by the process of devising and owning their own voices, which had a noticeable impact on the audience member's ability to engage with the material and continue co-creating towards a collective recognition of being part of something bigger within the expressive arts therapy collective. Phase two implied that the co-creative *performative inquiry* (Belliveau, 2008) provided a framework for students of diverse backgrounds to play with what-if possibilities that integrated their identities, evoked a sense of empowerment, and allowed for transformation. Furthermore, working through the uneasiness of performative tasks that offered a manageable amount of discomfort, paved the way for transformation and disrupting rigid ways of being (Wilson, 2020).

Phase three demonstrated the impact and lasting-effects that this process of co-creation and meaning-making had on me as I felt called to work through a part of me that was still active and needing space to creatively play with and move towards new possibilities via the projective object of a box and the characterization of the 'Disruptor.' While the experience of international students was the primary focus of this thesis, opening up the community event to all students revealed that the outsider perspective was powerful and present no matter the immigration status

of participants. Embodying characters outside of ourselves allowed us to channel our hopes while distancing us from the identities that had come to define us. We were given a space to define ourselves free of any rigidity and moldable enough to allow us some sense of control. The co-created and expressive arts-infused space was expansive enough to allow all outsider perspectives to be played with in order to re-shape and discover insights anew. These findings suggest that the expressive arts hold promise towards allowing for an engaging, embodied framework that supports international students towards transformation, opens up discovery for new possibilities, and disrupts traditional approaches to communication, research, and education.

Limitations

Given significant barriers that prevented my intended recruitment efforts from being fully realized, the current project was limited in the scope of its sample size. Thus, this thesis had a very small and specific sample size and may not be easily replicable to a broader population. Furthermore, in an effort to contain the scope of the population, this thesis focused on a subset of the expressive therapies cohort who were most accessible to me. While this did allow for an intimate and meaningful group of students to gather, this project could be expanded to include a greater number of international students who may benefit from the use of the expressive arts to better connect, cope, and find a voice within the collective.

Implications for Future Research

Recommendations for future research include expanding the Co-Creators Collective to welcome members across the creative arts therapies concentrations as there needs to be more creative collaboration taking place across the expressive therapies disciplines. Carr et. al (2021) similarly note this gap in the research where research tends to focus more on single arts modalities. This thesis enters the conversation with research that attempts to collaborate and

build a shared understanding across disciplines to recognize that we are united in the pursuit of alternative forms that defy traditional talk-based approaches to therapy and education.

Furthermore, there are currently barriers in place that prevent students from carrying out arts-based research to further the reputation and clinical efficacy of the expressive arts therapies.

Furthermore, it becomes the responsibility of education and research institutions to support such creatives who need innovative multi-sensorial resources to carry out their research processes.

This thesis demonstrates how much untapped potential there is to infuse the arts into research practices and meaning-making processes that naturally allow for collaboration and connection.

Conclusion

This capstone thesis hoped to support and give voice to a collective of international students within Lesley's Expressive Arts Therapy program. The Co-Creators Collective offered a virtual meeting place within a contained incubator for co-creation, framed within an accessible level of aesthetic distance, and marked by a productive degree of discomfort to ensure that participants were able to step outside of their comfort zones to discover anew. Naturally pulled towards symbolic language and projective objects to aid in their communication efforts, the Co-Creators Collective evolved to recognize that they did not need to search beyond themselves—the performance was within them all along. They were enough and their voices were ready to take the stage. As the co-creator's embodiments played with possibilities of what the future of the field may look like, any border or barriers around the screens that housed us dissolved to reveal a connecting force of flow that freed and transformed us to collectively let go of that moment in time and move forward with a heightened sense of urgency and direction.

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Appendix A**Co-Creators Collective Invitation**

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO BE A
MEMBER OF THE

Co-Creators Collective

*Let us come together to re-connect and co-create
in the midst of a time filled with uncertainty
and isolation. You have been selected as a
valuable member of Lesley's expressive therapies
student body. Your voice matters. This project is
about our collective experience and what it
means to both share with and witness one
another. There will be no passive viewing, every
member will assume a role and contribute to the
collective co-creation so come open and ready to
dive into the unknown alongside us...*

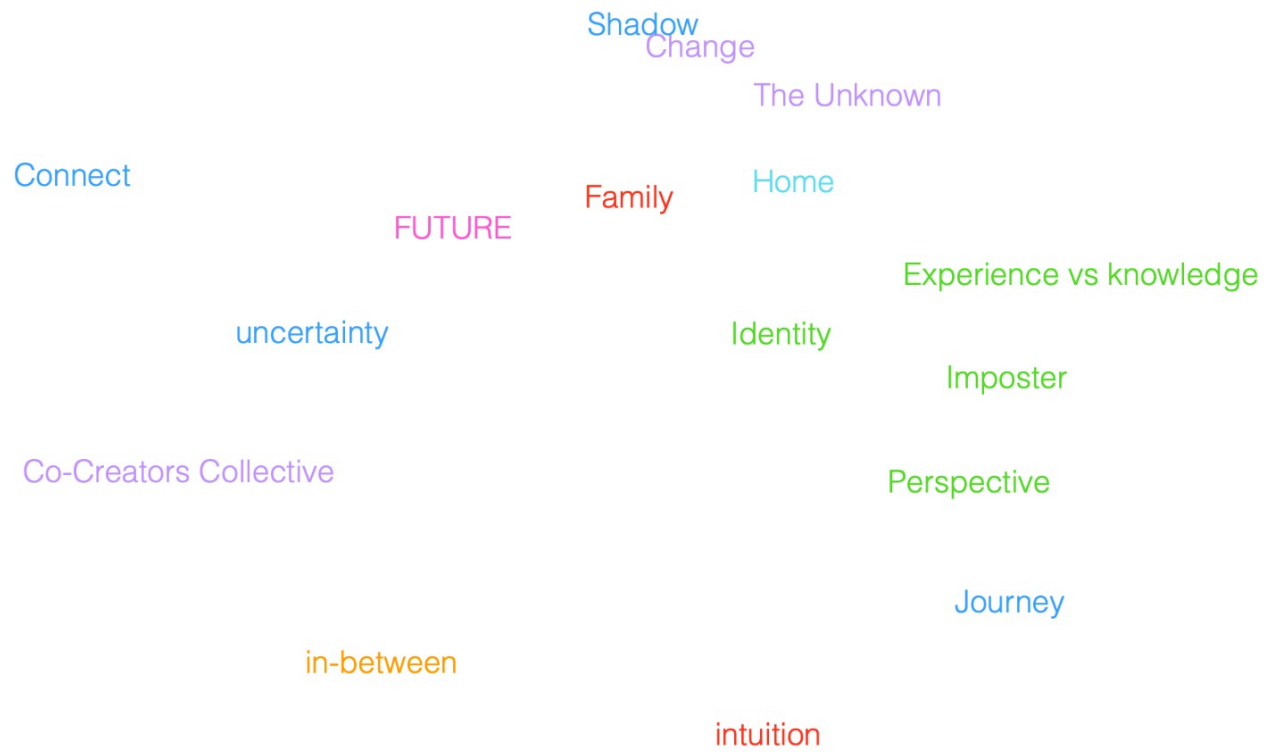
Sunday, March 21st
11:00 am - 12:30 pm
On Zoom

Appendix B**Free-Write Poetry from 1st Devising Meeting**

Sitting in the unknown
Frustrating
Exciting
Inspiring
Defeating
Follow my intuition
It is my inner guide of strength
I trust this group
The Co-Creators Collective
Don't think
Just do
Move
Create
BE
Breakdown
Build back up
SpiritDuality
Contradictions
The space in-between
Maybe we aren't so different?
Interdependence
Create don't regurgitate
I was destined to create my own path
I am not a follower
I am a guide
Towards infinite potential
I will find my way
Even when there feels like
no way
NO WAY
There is always a way
You are the way
We are the way
Get out of my way
I'm on my way!
Way
way
way
Up.

Appendix C

Whiteboard Brainstorm from First Meeting



Appendix D

Verbatim Script

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING ANY SENSE BUT...

J.J.: I've been thinking about what it means to just have a blank, open space and that it's quite overwhelming but also quite exciting because there is so much room for something new to happen. I've been thinking about how in the creative process we enter this unknown space and it's such a parallel to the uncertainty of the pandemic for me. It makes me inspired to think about how this relates to what the expressive arts framework can offer to people who are in that state of uncertainty and trying to come to terms with what it means to be in that unknown, in-between space.

F.B.: I almost feel that that uncertainty is a parallel for multiple uncertainties in life. It just adds another tint to it and when I was moving this around *art-response from first session* I was just thinking about "okay this is something. This is a color. These are shapes. These are lines. These are circles. But then at the same time what if I add this *places opaque dance scarf over* I mean, maybe the colors change a little bit, maybe how it reflects on the light, it just makes the shape change and then what if you add something on top of it *layers another scarf* call it a pandemic, call it someone else with another perspective - how does that look then? And then there's always a core underneath. These are just pieces *playing around with how layers fall over the page* And then like you said, there's always that excitement about a new page but then will these colors play a new role too? *turns to a blank page and begins to overlay scarves* or won't they anymore? I don't know...uncertainty

J.J.: It makes me think about the lens that each of us brings in that overlay and then when you mentioned there is something at the core, I wonder if even in a group like this, if there's something at our core of what we are each bringing. Recognizing that each of our experiences is different but there is also something guiding us that is very much authentic and at the core of what brings us to this work as well.

U.D.: I feel like my lens is identity. Like who am I within this arts therapy thing with everything that I bring with it. Because I think with me there's a lot of imposter syndrome kind of thing going on like this is what you should be like, this is what you should know, the differences between those who have the knowledge and have gone to undergrad for this and have like the book smarts that have just come from undergrad into graduate school compared to those with experience and what that brings to the table and not necessarily that one's better than the other but how to engage with that in the classroom. It sometimes feels like it's talked about that its not one size fits all but it kind of feels like that's what you have to be. Like how can I approach this to be my own and it be okay in that way and how can I encourage others to help people learn in that way.

F.B.: I kind of feel that in a way instead of just trying to fit a mold of who we are supposed to be, it's just be yourself, because that's also how we model for others to be themselves. How can we ask the people we serve to be themselves, to get to know their shadow, to get to know what's inside them, if we don't do that ourselves?

U.D.: Yes I agree with that totally. Just how do you do that in an academic setting? Like is there space. I mean there's some space like there's space to talk about this in class but is there space for that academically.

F.B.: I think there's also a lot of the power dynamics involved with it. What is it to be something that is academic? How do we incorporate our field which is something that is forming and it's coming together and it's basically integrating in so many ways and basically say "hey we're here we want to be someone in this academic world". We embody so much that goes against it like we are the rebels that paddle against the waves. I find the word disruptor an invitation, that's our role now, that's our responsibility to bring that disruption but then with that we get to bring something new.

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING ANY SENSE BUT...

J.J.: Uncertainty, not having the answers, not having control, coming back full circle, being rather than thinking. I feel like when I have creative juices flowing, I don't question myself so much but when I'm in a place of thinking I question myself so much more in terms of if I have a place in this work and I think in the beginning when I was coming towards the field and there was separation and it was in front of me it was easier to feel empowered in the work and now that it is time to jump in, it can feel a little bit less so and almost defeating in a way because you do have to create your own path and because there is so much emphasis on thinking and the sciences and it's almost like we are constantly in a battle to prove ourselves and that just feels exhausting on top of the type of work that we already do that is taking on other people.

F.B.: Going off of your idea of co-creation, I feel like even if we want to fit into this existing world that feels defeating or feels like a square or how I would call it a cage, like a caged bird, *shows bird cut out* this is me in the field, I want to fly. But at the same time, I need some other birds, I need some other people and as they fly they create waves in the wind that kind of guide my path at the same time so I almost feel that we are co-creating that path together. So even if we wanted to fit our work into a mold or this automatic response or to this pre-existing parameters and squares, that's impossible - we work with beings. It's not like we are testing gravity and acceleration and how x y & z element are going to react chemically. We're working with so much more than that. We're working with a being that is biological, that is psychological, that is social, that is a spiritual being, including ourselves in that encounter so each encounter is going to be different and a new creation so there's no way that we can even foresee and try to fit into a mold that already exists.

J.J.: That got me thinking about the idea of being a square and how it's related to us right now literally in our squares on Zoom. As much as our field is about being with people, right now in this moment we can't necessarily be with people in the same way and so how are we able to still have that experience of co-creation, of feeling empowered and connected to our community in this work when we are quite literally in these boxes, in different spaces, and separated.

F.B.: At the same time, the space that is outside that square is unknown for everybody in the square. So something is going to be happening around here *waves hands* that I know about, part of me and my environment but you cannot see it. But it's almost the same as when you work with people in person. There is so much you cannot see and you discover through that person so in a way this little square becomes also that window for you and for me to connect and for us to try to figure out what's in the endless space behind it. Like you need that window.

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING ANY SENSE BUT...

J.J.: Expressive arts therapy is flexible enough that you can take it in so many ways and because you can only train in certain parts of the world it's like I might have been this shape *palm open, star, with hands* and then I train in the U.S. and without even being aware of it I feel like there is a regeneration process where I am reshaped like this *fist with hand* and then I am churned out and I have to go back home and re-find a way to fit back into that country and that mold. And it's almost like when I went through my training I wasn't fully aware of how it was reshaping me. And it becomes so important to figure out what is your core and how do you separate your core versus what the training is instilling and reshaping in you.

F.B.: I don't want a mold. I've realized that my mold is not actually a mold. It's more like a clay that can just keep shifting, keep shifting, that's what I want for myself.

J.J.: But, who's shifting it?

F.B.: ME and my environment cause I might kind of push the clay of someone else but at the same time I am being shifted by that other entity at the same time. RECITRANSFORMATION.

U.D.: They are trying to teach you this *makes square hand symbol* but how does that fit? And if that's our job is that respected within that space. It's like okay we're going to give you this *square hand signal* but we want you to create your own shape. Like that's okay or is it like well actually you need to have SOME square on your shape, you can't be ALL your own shape.

F.B.: What I am hearing, I might be wrong but this is just what comes through me. There is something out there that is telling you about a square that is telling you about a mold but then you're like okay but who am I within this but there's something that is not being seen that is that ability to respond back and to actively say to that external entity "hey, maybe this is not a square, maybe you're looking at something else that you name a square but I don't want to name a square." And then you respond to it differently. What I'm saying is maybe we're looking at one side having an impact on us and our identity and whether it is something that can be empowering or something that can be oppressive and limiting, but then we're not looking at something within us that can also push back. What is there that can push back those boundaries and those limits? *smashing fist into hand* Because if not, we're taking all the information, all the limitations, and we have not only the responsibility, we have the strength to push back.

U.D.: I know you don't like the square idea *hands making square* but it feels like for me it's a square and like where they want you to go they're like yes do this thing and part of the square begins to wiggle but it never really breaks *hand demonstration* Like "OHH something is going to happen, we're going to change the world" but it just calms down and it's back to a square and nothing actually breaks through or gets done. Like there is action but it's like appeasing action like let's make a group and do this thing that nobody has time for! Academia is the square and they're like we want to change this, you're the next people, blah blah blah, which is making the square kind of wiggle on the side like oh it's going to break and turn into something else but in all reality it just goes back to a square. It just connects to what is going on in society. Like BLM, it was wiggling but like it's still a square, maybe there is a crack but it's still a square. It's kind of like let's kick that squares butt like *karate move*

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING SENSE BUT...

F.B.: Okay something just came to mind, I'm just going to toss it out there. So if we're trying to kind of wiggle or change that square, we're looking at a square that is 2 dimensional right. I don't want to look at a square that is two-dimensional, let's look at the cube ok. But if I try to push the cube alone, I'm not going to get anywhere, that's the thing - you can push back but that's where the interconnection comes, you push and then you get an effect but imagine 2 people pushing or 3 or 4. Imagine us all pushing. Imagine families, communities pushing. So I don't want to play with a square, I want to play with a cube and I just want to play and make it a sphere or ball *starts to play with ball* something that I can reshape but I'm not going to do it alone.

U.D.: Well that's kind of what I'm saying, they want to push these things and make these groups and they push but then they're back. It's like the breathing ball, everyone gets this *hands expand and open* everyone wants to do this and there's so much interest and then it gets *hands come in close* and then it just comes back down and it's like ok that was a moment.

J.J.: You're making me remember when I was younger my dad told me you know people always say think outside of the box, well no- don't think outside of the box, break down the box! That's the issue to begin with, that we're still working within this frame and until you fix and remold that, you're always going to be dealing with a bigger system that you're submerged in.

U.D.: And that's where it comes crashing down, it's a systems thing. Like okay, what do you want me to do? This is the way the world is but we're expressive arts therapists like that's a different thing, it's been around forever in all reality, indigenous people did it, like it's a real thing. They didn't have systems around it, they just did it. I don't know, this whole thing is just riling me up!!!

J.J.: That's what I want, feel it, let it take over you!! And I feel like when I'm with other creatives, I feel charged and empowered and exactly what you're naming, like you feel that in your body. That to me is this momentum, that I'm going towards something, that even though there's this huge system that I'm in and even though it feels way bigger than me, at least I have that sense of urgency and I don't necessarily have that on my own and that's why I love spaces like this, that's why I crave having some sort of a project that I'm working towards. Because if not I feel lost, like this little specimen in this huge vast universe, an endless abyss. That momentum and that sense of aliveness makes me come to terms better with not having answers, with only having questions, at least I feel like I have direction rather than feeling stuck. Like maybe we're not going to be able to reshape the system but at least we're pushing back and there's movement, there's not just stillness and conformity.

U.D.: We get into these groups and we get into this flow and have these thoughts and I was just thinking that right now is the end of the semester and you girls are graduating and how this is so nice *flowing movements* and then you have to stop because now you have to do the thinking part and this kind of takes a backseat.

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING ANY SENSE BUT...

F.B.: I think my new challenge now is trying not to find meaning on purpose but rather letting them find me. And I like the ideas of the elements. Even the air, the mountain, the rain, they can all see their shadows in between. And it came up for me because in the intro you said that some people suffer in the dark and for me this kind of poem or reflection, it's almost as if trying to acknowledge that there is that shadow or that there is some suffering or brokenness in everybody but at the same time it is something that is recycled because it is recycled in everybody and everyone ends up in a cycle mixing with each other with one another and just coming together and it's not a linear process. And I think it's a parallel of what we do with people we serve and we do as a group or as a community in relation to other fields and what we try to do and create a path in this river for ourselves as well.

F.B. reads poem in Spanish

U.D. & J.J. improv movement inspired by poem with overlay of scarf over their screens

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M MAKING ANY SENSE BUT...

U.D.: I JUST WANT TO MOVE.

J.J.: then let's move! Let's move beyond this square, out of this cage. What are you each moving towards? Let's see if we can almost let ourselves transform into a manifestation of what we hope to be in this field...

dance party to *Out of the Box* theme song

F.B.: introduces her embodiment in the field

U.D.: introduces her embodiment in the field

J.J.: introduces her embodiment in the field

Appendix E

Performance Framework

Drawing inspiration from the recording of our meeting, I created a transcript of what was said and turned it into an example script below for you to check out if that feels helpful. But don't feel like you need to memorize or recreate that because this is about what comes up in the moment...

So much of our sharing was grounded in objects so I have decided to frame the improv around the materials that naturally came up as it creates an evolution:

Blank sheet of paper
Dance Scarves/Opaque Cloth
Cube/Box
Clay/Putty
Hoberman Sphere/Breathing Ball

Transitioning from object to object when we feel called to, we will share in an agreed upon progression such as:

J.J.
U.D.
F.B.

This will all lead towards a spontaneous dance party that allows us to move and transform into a manifestation of what we hope to be in the field (for example, F.B. you brought up the bird free from their cage, “this is me in the field, I want to fly. But at the same time, I need some other birds, I need some other people and as they fly they create waves in the wind that kind of guide my path at the same time so I almost feel that we are co-creating that path together.)

U.D.: I JUST WANT TO MOVE.

J.J.: then let's move! Let's move beyond this square, out of this cage. What are you each moving towards? Let's see if we can almost let ourselves transform into a manifestation of what we hope to be in this field...

dance party *Out of the Box* theme song <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9EWpm2zapc>

F.B.: introduces her embodiment in the field

U.D.: introduces her embodiment in the field

J.J.: introduces her embodiment in the field

Appendix F

Co-Creators Collective Agenda

11:00-11:10 AM

- Play Potter and Friend for filler waiting on late participants

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNK4XC7g1Tg>

11:10-11:15 PM - Bell & Check In

- o What do you need to put down to clear your mind and be more present with the collective & what brings you here/what you hope to get out of this?

11:15-11:20 AM - Description of the project and what to expect for the session

11:20-11:35 AM - Performance Presentation *spotlight our screens on Zoom*

11:35-11:45 AM - Invite the audience to unmute and ask characters questions

- o Staying in character, Jamming the Jellyfish/Undefined/Free Bird will be available for interviews

11:45-11:55 PM - Expanding what the future of the field may transform into

- o Turn on videos one by one to join our characters on screen & to see what the future of the field will look like, who inhabits that space
- o Collective dance party *REACH by Rizon song*

11:55-12:10 PM - Moving sculpture co-creation collective

- o "I am _____ but I will _____"
- o "I am _____ & I am also _____"
- o "We are _____"

12:10-12:25 PM - Reflections

- o Checking in around what this experience was like for the collective

12:25-12:30 PM - Bell & Closing

- o A phrase/movement/sound to capture what you are taking away such as something helpful or empowering and if there is anything you wish to offer the group

Appendix G

Community Event Clip of Free Bird

See Video Clip of Free Bird

Appendix H

Verbatim Closing Take-aways from Community Event

What I want to take-away is also what I want to send with you all which is that there is so many of us like moving through the world who are creative in a generative way and on the edge of so much unknown. And that there will be so many of us that never meet but our lives having kind of this resonance is really important to hold onto right now *holds palms to chest in back and forth motion*

I want to take and also send as well the wholeness that I feel, connected. And I want to send that wholeness with you as many of you are graduating. Know that you are part of something bigger that you can always come back to and find that peace again, that wholeness, if you need it.

I'm going to take away the ability to have different lenses cause we're always seeing things through our own eyes but also the ability to shape-shift. I feel like I'm always evolving and being with others allows me to transform that much greater, that resonance. And what I want to offer the group is those wings that came from Free Bird, I want to name how much [absent performer in Peru's] image of the bird resonated with this group. Just that feeling of being free and amplified by the waves that are created, by the impact that we have on the world, and how that impact comes back to affect us. And so it's just this reciprocal process that is always moving us towards something. Forward.

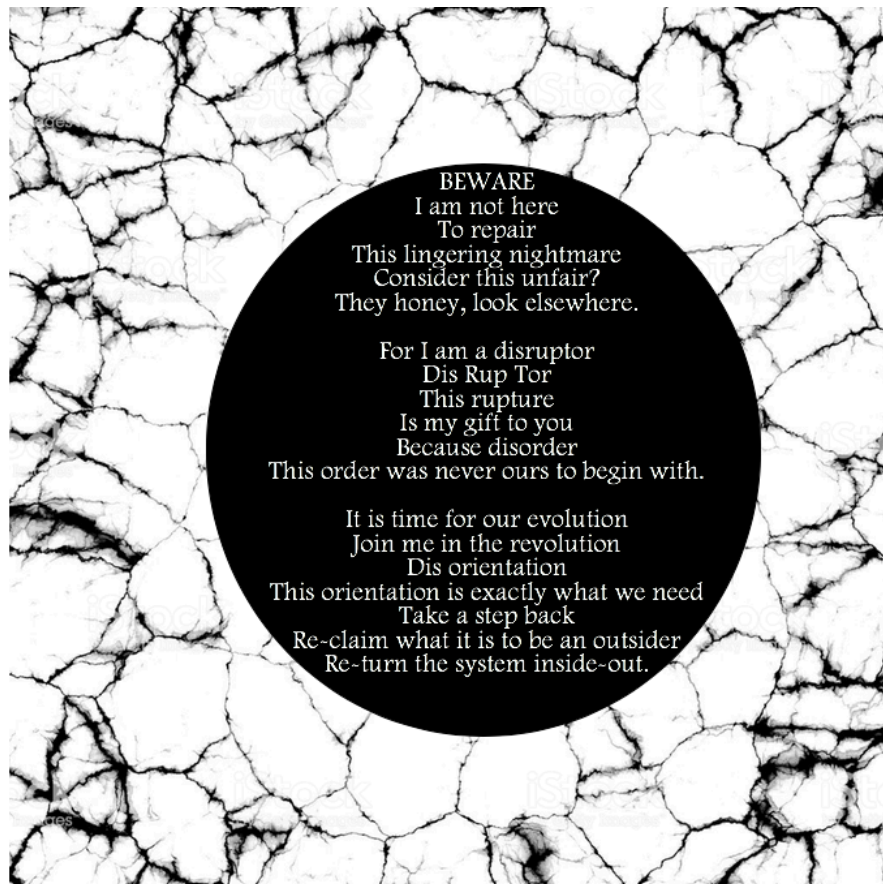
So I think I'll take away that undefined, that transformation, that possibility. After Kaeleigh talked about her intention of this thesis, I really want to support this idea that this kind of creativity can also be research and can be valid and should be taken seriously. I just want to send that support to Kaeleigh and this whole process.

I will take away the vibes from Undefined and Free Bird. I am a huge narrative therapy fiend and something I think that is really transcendent and wonderful about narrative therapy is the space that is opened up when you stop tightly clinging to identity and identifiers so I found that very inspiring and I would like to offer to the group friendship, I'm down to hang out, I'm down to talk about the work if anyone wants to hang out.

Appendix I

Arts-Based Reflections of The Disruptor

See Video Clip of The Disruptor



THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University

Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences

Expressive Therapies Division

Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy

Student’s Name: Kaeleigh De Silva

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Shape-Shifting Anew: A COVID-19 Come-Unity Engagement Project

Co-Created by an International Student Collective

Date of Graduation: 5/5/2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tamar Hadar, MT-BC